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THE SOCIAL CRITICISM OF LITERATURE

The noteworthy fact in the history of recent publication is the disappearance from the popular magazines, even of the better class, of the critical essay, the form of writing that deals in a rather free yet serious manner with general ideas. An attempt to remedy this condition and to furnish adequate media for publication of prose writing which combines a free play of general intelligence with attractiveness of form, has led to the establishment at various universities of quarterly magazines. The result is that the critical essay is coming more and more to be the special charge of the university. The purpose of this paper is to consider some of the changes that may be expected to appear in view of this different status of critical writing, and to suggest a new function of literary criticism as an academic specialty.

The cause of this changed status of the critical essay is doubtless economic. For the type of literary essay that formerly appeared in the English reviews there is no longer a market. Furthermore, the vast growth of every department of knowledge has led to specialization, and thus has tended to crowd the essay of general interest from the field. It now requires extraordinary assurance or exceptional versatility for a writer to deal, as did Matthew Arnold, with critical valuations of poetry ancient and modern, with Biblical and theological questions, and with contemporary problems of politics and sociology. The evolution of knowledge has tended to divide the field between journals and publications devoted to special subjects, on the one hand, and popular literature, on the other. Popular writers supplying the demand of the market emphasize the sensational, the sentimental, and the dramatic, over the critically intellectual. The demand of the public for distinction is in personality rather than in intellect. On the other hand, the special journals are technical in method and vocabulary; and in their demand for authentication and established certitude are impatient of the cavalier theories and generalizations of the critical writers of a generation ago. From this it is evident that literary criticism, unless it is to become

a lost art, must enlist the financial support of some foundation, preferably the modern university.

In coming into academic recognition and patronage literary criticism will probably undergo modifications. Owing to the accepted principle by which universities seek the advancement of knowledge—the division of labor—the field of criticism will have to be delimited so as not to overlap wastefully the other domains of knowledge, and criticism will be obliged to seek some more objective and authoritative basis than the mere individual opinions and personal convictions of critical writers.

As a step toward elaborating these points it may be well to present some definitions of criticism. In its widest possible sense literary criticism is writing about writing, books about books. The creative writer represents or reacts upon some phase of man or nature, and the critical writer reacts upon the representation or reaction of the creative writer. In doing this he simplifies, condenses, and edits. Typically, though not in all cases, he “restates the concrete in terms of the abstract”. A less general definition of criticism assumes a twofold division of the field of literary study: the first, exposition, assuming the point of view of the author, and aiming solely at the elucidation of his purpose, method and technique; or the explanation of his product by reference to the intellectual traditions, the personal forces and the environmental conditions that made it possible; the second, criticism, aiming at a judgment of truth or value by reference to some authoritative standard. In still more detail criticism may be classified as impressionism or appreciation; historical criticism, philology, or exact scholarship; æsthetic criticism; and judicial criticism.

As regards suitability for academic patronage impressionism or appreciation are not, I believe, likely candidates. The demand of the university for evidence, for probability, for certitude, its prevailing scientific spirit, is more or less at variance with the temper that produces work of this kind. Besides, impressionistic writing of good quality is more certain of a popular market, and thus more independent of institutional support. It will doubtless survive within the university as an avocational by-product of a few teachers of languages, and will continue in

general as the expression of people of leisure and independent taste.

The second form of criticism—philology, historical criticism, or exact scholarship—is the special protégé of the university. Aiming primarily at the discovery and verification of fact, and hence characteristically without general interest of subject-matter or attractiveness of form, it has lacked a market in the popular publications. Moreover, in its efforts to preserve or discover knowledge pertaining to the past, it is too remote from the contemporary interests of the reader of the popular magazines. This form of criticism has within the recent past represented a large proportion of the total quantum of university output; and it will doubtless continue as one of the special fields of university activity. Its aim, however, is rather the preservation than the dissemination of information, and its function, the building of a firm basis of knowledge upon which the teacher of literature may present subjects of more general interest and usefulness to the mass of students and the reading public. In fact, philological scholarship should ideally be considered a species of literary capital, abstaining from the immediate enjoyment of the literary product, and expending itself in fashioning the tools that make for certitude and completeness of exposition, to the end of a greater, if a vicarious, literary enjoyment. Exact scholarship, from the point of view of the narrower definition of criticism, is a phase of exposition. And, as usage goes, its devotees speak of themselves as scholars rather than as critics. Criticism, as the term is generally understood, refers to discussion—to exposition or evaluation of contemporary writing. If not impressionistic it is either æsthetic or judicial. Æsthetic criticism is another form of exposition. How a writer secures his effects, the sources of literary impressions, the nature of the comic, the tragic, the sublime, the beautiful, the grotesque, the pathetic,—these are subjects of special academic interest, the concern of the psychologist and the student of æsthetics.

The remaining type of criticism, not the traditionally judicial, but something akin to it, is what is to be considered in this paper from the point of view of its proper function in the academic economy. By this class of criticism is meant a more or less

authoritative pronouncement upon current books or writings as regards their truth or soundness for the education of public taste and intelligence. Criticism in this sense is a live art, having contemporaneousness as its essence, and aiming at the maximum dissemination of knowledge and the maintenance of the most vital relations between specialized learning and popular thought. Literature and art in some form are social necessities. There is little danger of the degradation of either the natural or the social sciences by popular support of careless or flashy work, but there is always a possibility of this in the field within which criticism operates. Literature, with its union of thought or opinion or prejudice, its intellectual content, with charm or stimulus of form, is essentially persuasive in its nature. Style in writing is the counterpart of personal magnetism in speech, and hence is a dangerous weapon in the hands of the interested propagandist, the indolent traditionalist, or the immature intellectual adventurer. The function of what—adopting a term of Professor Buck's—might be called the social criticism of literature, would, then, be the academic, and hence relatively authoritative validation or invalidation of the claims of contemporary poets, novelists, and dramatists to be guides of popular sentiment. It is, in brief, the offering of expert advice to the general reading public. Its function is to distinguish that which is true from that which is merely interesting. In the words of Mr. Brownell, "it would apply the criterion of reason to the work of ascertaining value apart from mere attractiveness".

The peculiar problem of this, as of all other forms of judicial criticism, is the difficulty of "validating its decisions for the acceptance of others". And this has been the rock upon which all forms of systematic or deductive criticism have ultimately crashed. The rules of Aristotle, the canons of classical criticism, are now universally admitted to be arbitrary and irrelevant. And in the past the critic who employed these or similar deductive standards in opposition to the creative writer almost invariably met with defeat. In fact, the critic has been characteristically ineffectual in cases where he has opposed the creative writer, because he has lacked convincing grounds of opposition. He has had no more formidable evidence than the man he opposed;

it was the case of the opinion of one man against that of another; and the critic lacked, in comparison especially with the poet, most of those persuasive and insinuating forces that could be subsumed under the general caption of beauty. Judicial critics resisted with utter futility the poetic claims of Wordsworth, Keats, and Byron; in fact, in the early nineteenth century the critics went down in decisive defeat. Their successors 'played safe' as appreciators or impressionists, or as philologists waited until the writers were safely dead, and then delved industriously for their bones. But of recent years there has arisen something of a revival of judicial criticism in reaction against the excesses of realists, naturalists, imagists, impressionists, and other radical or semi-radical groups, so that the conflict assumes some of the aspects of a burning question.

To confront the problem, the essential point is the establishment of a standard of criticism. And this standard, for a number of reasons, will have to do with content rather than with form. In the first place, on the principle of specialization, the poet, the creative writer, is concerned largely with acquiring a mastery of the minutiae of his technique. The critic, contenting himself with only such technical knowledge as is necessary to understand the writer, has more time and energy to apply himself to a study of those phases of life and knowledge and belief that constitute the content of the writer's product when it is "restated in terms of the abstract". Besides, the writer is sometimes actuated by impulse, passion, sentiment, or prejudice. He is often the diviner, the only half-conscious mouthpiece of his time, his class, or his party. He may create by means of imagination that has not stood the test of reason; by conscience, the voice of the past; or by intuition, which may be of exceptional authority, but which may, on the other hand, be only a name for a fusion of complex motives that have not been analyzed. The critic, through his wider philosophic scope and better trained judgment, exercises his special function of "ascertaining value apart from mere attractiveness", and thus protects the public from false but persuasive prophets, and officially recommends those teachers whose doctrines are such as will prove socially beneficial. The poet, the critic, and the public

form a declining series as regards a necessary knowledge of technique. The business man, the industrial worker, may appreciate a poet, like Kipling, for example, instinctively by the ear. His conscious response to the poetic technique need be no more than a recognition that he can march to the music. What remains in his mind is a form of viewing man and nature, a political attitude, an embryonic philosophy of life, a norm of conduct. And this philosophy of life, this standard of action, it is the function of the critic to judge.

But what of the standard of criticism? As has been noted before, neither impressionism nor exact scholarship nor classical judicial criticism will suffice. There remain the possible standards of taste, of reason, and of social utility.

The quality of taste has been the foundation of much excellent literary criticism, but it is obvious that this is no universal or unvarying arbiter. Tastes differ, and, according to the proverb, there is no disputing about them. Besides, although taste is a very valuable artistic faculty, its field is practically limited to artistic form or technique, and hence its exercise is mainly irrelevant as regards matter, which is the chief province of social criticism. As a standard of criticism that stops short of rational or logical criteria, taste is a species of cultivated impressionism, the culture precipitating from study of literary masterpieces of the past, and operating by reference to these as norms or touchstones. Hence, there is much pertinence in the criticism of taste as ultra-conservative, as inapplicable to the solution of problems arising in those relations in which life is in flux and in need of new principles of adaptation. In brief, since taste is essentially traditional, it is incapable of pronouncing upon those problems that have arisen since the crystallization of the traditions on which it is based. Although its contributions to the appreciation of artistic form are invaluable, taste, as a standard of criticism, falls into the same slough of relativity as the other methods. In attempting to enforce its decisions it is driven to the same devices of persuasion—style, irony, emphasis and sincerity of manner—that characterize the creative writer or poet. The measure of its cogency is personality rather than intelligence. Hence, when in opposition

to the poet, it competes in a field in which it is seriously handicapped.

Other proposed standards of criticism are rationalized taste and social serviceability. While pointing in the right direction, and indicating the most fruitful methods, these will need some further particularization before they can furnish such a definite standard as to justify their exemplars in looking to institutional support. The principle that is proposed in this paper is that the best way of attaining to reason and a judgment of social serviceability as a means of determining the value of literature, is a study of the social sciences in addition to æsthetics. The preparation of the critic would be as full as possible a knowledge of metaphysics, ethics, psychology, economics, sociology, and anthropology; and, for the rest, a disposition to coöperate with the special workers in these fields.

The special function of the type of critic here imagined would be the evaluation from the standpoint of a general knowledge of what is being done in the social sciences, of the current literature and art which, in addition to being interesting or recreational, is also by purpose or implication didactic. From the above observations it would appear that the philosopher and the sociologist have already the equipment for the most reliable of literary critics; but there are practical difficulties in the way of their working in this capacity. Since in America the study of philosophy and sociology is confined almost exclusively to the college community, the specialists in these fields are partly engrossed in the routine of teaching and partly in the special problems of their departments, toward the solution of which they are expected to contribute. The literary critic as an academic specialist would not be expected to add to the sum of knowledge in any of these lines of human interest, but would need in a general way to keep abreast of the times. In place of productive scholarship he could substitute a breadth, a capacity for integration and correlation, and a faculty for ready application of general principles to a direction of the stream of literary tendency.

In view of the absorption of specialists in the departments of social sciences in their own special activities, there has been none, to my knowledge, who has concerned himself with any no-

table success with the work of literary criticism. Many of the most successful of modern authors, however, have approached literature from the point of view of an interest in economic or ethical or sociological questions. George Bernard Shaw has adopted the drama as his medium of expression, since he considers it the most effective instrument to the end of socialistic propaganda. The only question of the social critic in cases of this kind is whether the writer is giving currency to doctrines that are in harmony with the consensus of opinion of specialists in the fields in question. If the experts are not agreed, it would be the duty of the critic to inform the public that the doctrine which was so attractively presented was still in question among those who were most qualified to decide. Another tendency that might obviate the need of our imaginary critic, or much lighten his responsibility, would be for the authorities in special subjects of human interest to take the pains to develop an effective literary style, such as was possessed by Huxley and Fiske, and more recently by Bryce, Dickinson, Veblen, and others. In fact, the rather special article written in excellent and untechnical English appears not infrequently in such acceptable periodicals of the better class as the *Atlantic Monthly*, and compensates in part for the loss of the more general essay of the kind that came from the pens of Arnold, Newman, and others a generation ago.

At the present time the bulk of the serious and effective criticism in America is the work of university professors of English or editors of current periodicals. This criticism naturally reflects the temperament or training that is fostered by the requirements of success in this department. A professor of English is pretty sure to have a command of the technique of historical criticism. He frequently also by temperamental proclivity and traditional education possesses literary taste; but his ignorance of the social sciences is often about coextensive with the whole field. Hence, his serious professional research is characteristically devoted to the field of historical criticism. So thorough and extensive has been this work that exact scholarship in the field of English has of late years begun to present the aspect of a worn-out mine. When one comes to spend his time digging for facts about books that are not studied in the

class-room or read by the public, he is likely to feel that he has applied his intellectual capital and labor some distance beyond the point of diminishing returns.

However it is, of recent years a number of our abler university teachers and scholars have gone into the field of critical pronouncement upon such literary works as are the subjects of college reading or contemporary popular interest. Professor William P. Trent, Mr. W. C. Brownell, Professor George E. Woodberry, Mr. Paul Elmer More, and Professor Stuart P. Sherman are among the most distinguished of these. A common characteristic of the writing of all these men is their distinction of style. In respect of method and the standard of judgment employed there is some degree of variance. The critical writings of Professor Trent might be characterized as a graceful and persuasive discussion of the objects of his own literary affections. This dignified impressionism of Professor Trent's earlier years does not seem to have quite satisfied his professional conscience, since he has devoted himself of recent years to strenuous research. With the writings of Professor Woodberry I am not sufficiently familiar to hazard a generalization. Mr. Brownell is one of the most acute of modern writers on literature, art, and æsthetics. And he is the master of a style of great intricacy and beauty, but far too involved to serve as a medium of popular exposition.

Perhaps the most characteristic of the contemporary school of American literary critics are Mr. More and Professor Sherman. They agree notably in their method—judicial criticism—and in the bent of their critical judgments, an approval on the whole of earlier or traditional standards of doctrine and literary form, and a condemnation of present radical or naturalistic tendencies. The philosophy that is at the basis of Mr. More's *Shelburne Essays* is the dualistic philosophy, a version of Platonism. The grace and precision with which these essays are written, the scope of thought, and the entire consistency of exposition, will make this work of permanent value; but it is obvious that the final validity of this criticism, its ultimate social value, depends upon the soundness of the basic philosophy. In this connection our critic might look for light among his friends the philoso-

phers. If they agreed that Platonism is probably the most accurate view of the world, he would accept their opinion, and half the problem of criticism would be solved. His function would then be to continue the work of Mr. More, and to distinguish among contemporary authors those who wrote from the true or Platonic inspiration from those whose intuitions were wayward and unsound. But, if the philosophers as a rule should be sceptical of Platonism as a guide to life and conduct, and this scepticism should be shared by the psychologists and the sociologists, the critic would then question the finality of Mr. More's critical judgments, and leave the matter in suspense pending further discoveries in the fields of knowledge or a more illuminating synthesis of knowledge already at hand.

One of the most representative of the new school of American judicial critics is Professor Sherman. His brilliant analyses, his command of style, irony, and satirical epithet, make him a formidable opponent of all radical or innovating tendencies in current literature. As the champion of dignified American tradition he may be profitably studied as a representative of the conservative tendencies in American criticism. The basis of Mr. Sherman's judgments is partly literary taste and partly a system of philosophy. His taste is based upon the English literary tradition that became crystallized prior to the period of the French revolution. His philosophy, as expounded lucidly in his essay, *The Humanism of Shakespeare*, is a species of dualism in harmony on its ethical side with the more liberal phase of the early spirit of puritanism, and roughly to be summarized as a rationalized mid-Victorianism. In harmony also with the earlier English tradition, Mr. Sherman is an exponent of that individualistic self-reliance that from an early date was a prevalent American ideal. The abundance of free land in the country until within recent years, the undiscovered or undeveloped mineral resources, the infant but growing industries, offered a practical equality of opportunity to every American in the fields of agriculture, mining, and industrial enterprise. This condition favored ambition, energy, and initiative; it fostered respect for private property, a disposition to judge each man's success as a measure of his personal worth, and a tendency to resent social and governmental

interference as an infraction of one's natural liberty. In addition to the force of traditional American ideals there are, one might presume, other conditions that tend to accentuate Mr. Sherman's characteristic conservatism. Mr. Veblen has recently pointed out that conservatism is a normal trait of human nature; it is based on a psychological principle analogous to the law of inertia; and there is only one condition that is actively hostile to it,—an experience of economic pinch. Now, the successful university professor of English is secluded from those contemporary and personal storms that would tend to sweep one into the path of evolutionary change. The student of literature in quest of "the best that has been thought, felt, or done in the world", ranges imaginatively through the past and acquires the historical sense. Hence, the present and the near future lose the special value that they have for discontented spirits as opportunities for innovation and readjustment, and retain significance more in proportion to their relatively slight contribution to monuments of permanent beauty and expressiveness. Again, the spirit of elegant literary tradition is a survival from the time when authors wrote under the support of aristocratic patrons, the well-to-do, or the leisure class; and when, as in the case of the modern popular novelist, they were influenced inevitably by the demand of the market. Furthermore, the successful professor of English, who draws a salary of \$5,000 or more—although he may be a type of monastic frugality beside the industrial leader of equal distinction—surrounded as he is by shoals of half-destitute instructors, has attained, relatively at least, to those guarded heights of economic security which, according to Mr. Veblen, are the *natural* grounds of the conservative attitude.

As regards the validity of Mr. Sherman's criticism, the standard of taste that he employs is open to the same objections on grounds of relativity that were considered above. So far as the philosophy of dualism operates as a standard, its validity, according to the method of coöperative criticism, is to be established by a consensus of opinion of men who have made their business a study of philosophy. And, if their approval is withheld, the conclusions of Mr. Sherman's criticism should be supplemented by a footnote to the effect that the bases of this

criticism are still unestablished, according to the dicta of the best available expert opinion.

As regards the doughty conservatism of Mr. Sherman's attitude toward social questions, the economist and the sociologist, according to this method, might profitably be consulted. And it is probable that they would disapprove of some features of his system. While commending his power of contributing toward the conservation of those values that would unfortunately be lost in a world of rampant intellectual bolshevism, they would hardly approve of his assumption of the superiority of a static organization of social life. The economist might point out that the conditions of American life have greatly changed within the past twenty years; that since the frontier has disappeared and free land is no longer available, there is imperative a readjustment in the conditions of rural life; and that, since cities have grown with astounding rapidity and the tools of production have passed largely into the ownership of capital, there are adjustments to be made also in this field. And the sociologist might suggest that in view of these changes the approximate equality of opportunity that existed throughout the early period of our republic no longer obtains; that much of our present literary anarchism is the sublimation of a sense of injustice; and that the rational remedy would be an external reestablishment of equality of opportunity through the force of governmental control and social organization. The sociologist might also point out that, since the human brain is the organ by which man has attained dominion over the animal world, its chief function is to secure that readjustment to a changing environment that is the condition of survival; and again that, since literature and art are crystallizations of the sentiments that arise as concomitants of the inevitable struggles of life, the critical standards by which they should be judged should also be of contemporary origin and based upon the acceptance of certain principles of change. In view of this alteration of perspective the social critic might venture to infer that much of our best contemporary criticism is rather one-sided, in need of supplement and annotation. Of course, he would at present hold this opinion only as an hypothesis; for after a more complete weighing of expert testimony and evidence he might

unreservedly approve of the standards and conclusions of the best contemporary criticism.

This acceptance of a consensus of opinion of specialists in the social sciences as the basis of deductive criticism will make possible something like an authoritative standard for literary judgment. And it would free judicial criticism from the charge of dogmatism; for the critic would pronounce with confidence only when he knew that he was supported by the weight of expert opinion; and the authority of his decisions would increase with the growth of knowledge. Then he might be constructively useful within the university through his efforts to correlate and integrate, and to further order and harmony within the educational system. In the light of recent events, it seems obvious that just this correlation of the conclusions of specialists is desperately needed in the world to-day. As a noted educator observed a decade ago, "the Germans know everything, or soon will". They did not know enough, however, to refrain from starting the most costly war in history. And, if they fall behind in the march of civilization, it will not be because they lacked ambition, energy, perseverance, scientific technique and a minute subdivision of labor, but because they left their learning at loose ends and accepted and acted upon a hasty and sentimental synthesis. There is probably no greater need in the educational world to-day than for trained workers to get together, to practise that coöperation that has so conspicuously succeeded in the field of industry, and, metaphorically speaking, to splice the loose or broken strands of learning so that twentieth-century man may give a communal heave upon the tow-line that draws the ship of state away from the breakers into the harbor.

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